

to arm your fears like soldiers and slay them
by viansian

Category: Daredevil
Genre: Romance
Language: English
Characters: Frank C./Punisher, Karen P.
Pairings: Frank C./Punisher/Karen P.
Status: Completed
Published: 2016-04-11 01:57:20
Updated: 2016-04-11 01:57:20
Packaged: 2016-04-27 20:10:18
Rating: T
Chapters: 1
Words: 6,848
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
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><p>Karen Page had always hated her soulmate tattoo. It was bad enough being where it was (along the outside of her left side, right along the line of her ribcage), but the fact that it was literally black dots that could easily be mistaken as freckles made it the most boring soulmark ever. She's sure of it.<p>

Those fucking dots had caused her a hell of a lot more trouble than she'd like to admit.

She remembers when she was in the third grade when all the girls gathered at recess and showed their marks. Susan had a flower on her

wrist, there a cross on the back of the preacher's daughter's neck, and Jill, beautiful, popular, queen-bee Jill, had flaunted the arrow running from her sternum to the hollow of her neck. Then, they had all looked at her with expectant eyes.

"Well, Karen. Where's yours?"

When she had slowly lifted her shirt just enough to let them see the black dots on her ribs, they had all given her a blank look and asked her what it was supposed to be.

She didn't know back then and twenty-two years later, she can't say the answer is any different. The only thing she can say is that she cares a whole lot less.

She hadn't even made it through middle school before she had decided that soulmarks were nothing but trouble, and if she ever met her match, she would turn and run the other way. Having a mother who up and left without warning one night, leaving only a note saying that she found her real soulmate, leaves a bitter taste in your mouth, especially when you're only twelve and a half years old. Seeing your father cry every night for the next four months sure doesn't wash that taste out either.

Karen Page had seen it all. Photo-shopped tattoos trying to be passed off as authentic in divorce court cases (as if that gave an excuse), television commercials promising higher matching rates than ever before, screaming fans waving their man-made marks at the most recent teen heartthrob, domestic violence cases where the victim refuses to leave the abuser because they happened to be born with the same tattoo. Oh yeah, she'd seen it all. She'd seen the lost little people looking for true love and coming back empty handed. She'd seen perfectly good marriages ruined by a matching mark, families torn apart, people's lives thrown into chaos, and the excuse was always identical. "But our marks were the same."

Karen had gotten over the whole "soulmate" hype by the time she was thirteen years old, and she didn't plan on getting swept up in that shitstorm again anytime soon.

She had seen Matt's once or twice, a small trident just peeking above his collarbone, tip barely an inch above where his shoulder met his neck. She saw it sometimes when she helped him adjust his tie around his neck, but never had the courage to ask about it. After he approached her with the Devil of Hell's Kitchen's helmet in hand, she could've kicked herself for being so stupid. Not a trident. A pitchfork.

Hold on with two hands. That's what Frank had told her to do. Granted, he had told her mere minutes before he turned around and slaughtered the two men that walked after them into the diner, so maybe it wasn't the most solid advice she'd ever taken.

But it was hard to hold onto something that was trying to slip away, and to be honest, she was sick of it. She was sick of trying to find reasons to make Matt stay, sick of trying to get him to make up his mind, to make a decision when he clearly wanted two things he couldn't have at once. Karen had been a second choice before. She didn't plan on being it again. Ever.

So here she was. Alone with nothing but an empty apartment and the lamest soulmate tattoo in the history of soulmarks to keep her company. Who cares anyways? She's got a job. She's got money to pay the bills (even if just barely). She's free of a toxic relationship, and life is as good as it's gonna get in Hell's Kitchen.

She finally thinks that she might be able to call her life "normal" one day when she hears a knock one day, and she swings the door open to see a dead man standing in the hallway.

There is silence. A long blink. Then she slams the door straight in his face. (So maybe she has never been the best at dealing with conflict. Or forgiving. Or people like Frank Castle. So what?)

"Page," she hears his muffled voice. "Page, please."

She has half a mind to lock the door, go into her bedroom, and blast some music until he goes away, but truth be told, Karen has always been a sucker for a good fight, and when it comes to battle, he's the best. So she yanks the door open and finds herself standing toe-to-toe with the psychopathic murderer (well, not really) that is the Punisher.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?" she snaps, her eyes firmly set forward, staring into the dark fabric of his shirt rather than his face. "And how do you know where I live?"

"I've got some information for you, ma'am" he mumbles. His voice is soft and words slurred (is he drunk?) but she does not miss his avoiding the question. "It's 'bout that article you wrote, the one on the jury tampering in New York City v. Headly."

"I don't give a shit," she hisses in return. "I told you that you were dead to me. I told you that I never wanted to see you again."

When she finally pulls her eyes up to look at his, he almost knocks the breath right out of her. He's got that same stupid baseball cap on as he did at the diner, fresh bruises decorate his face like a watercolor of purple and blue, and in this moment, she's hit with the realization that she missed him. She really did. She missed seeing a crazy man who ran around killing criminals in his spare time.

Jesus Christ, what had her life come to?

It takes her a second to notice that his eyes are glazed over, and he's not so much looking at her so much as through her. The door across the hallway cracks open, and she sees Ms. Modoski stepping forward, her two-year-old son sitting on her hip.

"Everything all right, Karen?" she asks. She must have heard arguing, because her voice is wary as she rakes her eyes up and down Frank's back, as if assessing how much of a threat he is.

(Karen has come to notice that look more and more often, from all the women around her, the ever cautious, ever analyzing look of an animal constantly in fear for it's life. After Union Allied, she had begun to notice that she wasn't the only one to see threats and dark

corners everywhere she looked in this hell of a city. It was a view shared by all the women of Hell's Kitchen. Men like Matt hated the Punisher because he took the law into his own hands, became judge, jury and executioner. But men like Matt didn't see the world the same way that she did, the same way that Ms. Modoski did. Men like Matt didn't have to worry about walking down dark alleys, didn't have to be fearful of leaving their drinks alone for too long at the bar. Men like Matt got the justice they wanted without the Punisher. The women of Hell's Kitchen didn't.)

Frank raises his hand, and lets out ragged cough against his palm. It sounds wet and hoarse, and as he brings it away, Karen catches a glimpse of something red on his hand.

Oh god.

He sways on his feet, and she realizes that if she doesn't do something quickly, he's going to collapse at the door of her apartment. Her mind runs a thousand miles per hour, desperate to find a solution, until she finally does the only thing she can think of. She raises her hand and slaps him across the face.

His head snaps to the side (she really didn't hold back, she had wanted to do that for too long) and if anything, he looks stunned for a moment. Then, biting her lip, she puts on the most emotionally anguished face she can summon, and throws her arms around his waist, pulling him close to her, and letting him lean on her for support. His arms wrap around her as well, but she knows it's more for balance than anything else. His whole body is like a house of cards, ready to collapse at a single gust of wind.

"You _asshole_," she wails into his chest, "You _dipshit_. You just get up and _leave_? I thought you were _dead_, Alex! No calls, no texts. I just wake up one morning and you were _gone!_ Get your sorry ass in here, you have a hell of a lot explaining to do!"

Without ever answering Ms. Modoski's question (she really, _really_ doesn't like lying to that woman), Karen pulls Frank into her apartment and kicks the door shut behind him, before helping him stumble into her bedroom. He barely makes it, and the moment he hits her bed, he's passed out, his face deathly pale.

"Shit," she mumbles to herself. "Shit, shit, _shit_."

What can she say? This was not how she was expecting her Saturday afternoon to go.

It takes her a grand total of two minutes and thirteen seconds to riffle through seemingly every drawer in her bathroom until she finds a first aid kit and rushes back to a still unconscious Frank. Her hands are shaking as she takes a scissors, and cuts the material of his shirt off.

The first thing she notices is the blood. It's everywhere, staining his shirt, her sheets, _everything_. _He's got so many cuts across his chest, she doesn't even know where to begin except to take the few gauze that she has and bandage them as best she can. Luckily, none of them seem too deep, and the biggest of her problems becomes the molting purple bruise on his left side, indicating at least one broken rib.

This was going to be a long day.

The bleeding finally stops, and she's able to clean him up enough to get a good look at his side, when suddenly, her heart stops in her chest. It's difficult to see through the black and blue tone of his skin, but sure enough, eight small black dots, easy enough to be mistaken as freckles, decorate the area just above the bottom of his ribcage.

If her hands were trembling before, it's nothing compared to how much they are shaking as she traces each one of those black dots, each one in the exact same place as her own, as if she has to touch them to make sure they're real.

He lets out a small groan, and she tumbles away from the side of the bed, her breathing coming heavy and fast.

Their marks are the same. Their marks are the same.

He makes another pained sound from the back of his throat, something that sounds too much like a whimper, and her feet move of their own accord, finding painkillers in her bathroom, grabbing a glass of water, climbing into the bed with him, and propping his head up on her lap as she helps him swallow the pills, murmuring promises that everything will be okay as the only world she has ever known comes crashing down around her.

He's her soulmate. Her soulmate is Frank Castle. Her soulmate is the Punisher.

Karen doesn't know if she wants to laugh, sob, or just die.

* * *

><p>He sleeps through the rest of the day and doesn't wake up until almost two in the morning. The panicked sounds that he makes as he shoots up from her bed jerk her out of her soft doze and she sits up beside him, softly shushing him, telling him he's okay, as she gently places a hand on his chest and guides him to lay down.<p>

Though he allows her to push him back down into the bed, his eyes still look wild and afraid, until they lock with hers, recognizing the familiar face. His eyes dart around the room, no doubt scanning for threats as she reaches to the nightstand and turns on a light, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"What's goin' on?" he asks, his voice gruff, a tint of panic still in his tone as he props himself up to his elbows, wincing slightly.

"Where are we?"

"You're at my apartment," she says soothingly. "You're okay. Everything is okay."

There is a long silence, and his breathing is still coming heavily, his eyes not meeting hers again. He seemsâ€¦uncomfortable. It takes her a moment to realize that here she is, her thumb brushing over his bare skin softly, wearing an oversized t-shirt and shorts, sitting in bed with a half-naked man who probably doesn't recall anything from the past twelve hours. Of course he's uncomfortable. (As to why she's

in bed with him, in her defense, this is her apartment. She wasn't about to sleep on the couch because he decided that her place was the best location to show up bruised and bloody.)).

She knows what it looks like.

"Youâ€|um, Iâ€|uh," she stutters. "Y-you showed up at my apartment door. You were bleeding pretty badly, so I brought you in and cleaned you up. I think you may have broken a few ribs. You had a bunch of cuts on your chest too, and the blood was getting everywhere so I justâ€|" she pauses, not knowing what else to say. "Soâ€|yeah."

He gives her a long, hard look, before laying back down and closing his eyes. "Thanks," he says. "I'll be out of your hair by tomorrow morning."

"Like hell you will."

His eyes snap open and he twists his head to look at her as she crosses her arms, a scowl to match his own marring her features.

"You show up at my home half dead and ready to pass out, and you expect me to just let you leave? No fucking way, Frank. You stay here at least another day. I don't need to write my next story about how the cops found you dead in a back alley because you couldn't actually fight the plethora of mobsters that want you dead."

There is a long silence. Then he speaks.

"Yes, ma'am."

To be honest, she hadn't expected him to agree, let alone do it that easily. Part of her let out a sigh of relief. Another part felt a pang of disappointment. Another just straight up starts screaming.

For a moment, she wants to just blurt it out. She wants to lift up her shirt and show him the matching marks on her side, to tell him that he's her soulmate, that the universe wants them together, that they are made from the same star. Then reality catches up to her, and she remembers that it's nearly 2am, and she's in a dingy apartment bed with a mass murderer who probably has a concussion and two broken ribs, and she's tired. So instead she simply rolls over and turns off the lamp, engulfing them in complete darkness.

"Get some sleep, Frank," she says, the words almost lost in the dark of her bedroom.

His grunt in reply will have to do.

* * *

><p>She has to say she's surprised when she wakes up the morning and he's still there. She has to say she's even more surprised when she wakes up the next morning and his arm his haphazardly thrown across her side with her back pressed to his chest.<p>

It takes her a solid ten minutes, but she manages to get free without waking him, and walks to the kitchen, starting a pot of coffee before

grabbing some clothes and hopping in the shower.

By the time she gets out, the entire bathroom has steamed up, and she 's drying her still damp hair when she finds him sitting at her coffee table with a cup of coffee, rifling through her notes for her most recent story.

She bites back her immediate reaction to ask him what the hell he is doing, and instead opts for a gentler question of how he feels. He makes some unintelligible noise as a response, and suddenly she wishes she had gone with her first option.

Sitting down beside him, their shoulders brush she feels him stiffen, but ignores it, leaning forward and inspecting her own notes for what feels like the billionth time.

"Well," she says, "see anything of value?"

"They were bribed," he grunts.

She lets out a scoff and rolls her eyes. "A blind man could've told you that."

"Speaking of, you and Murdock still a thing?"

The bitter taste in her mouth has nothing to do with coffee she is sipping. "No," she replies, her voice calloused and hard, leaving no room to ask for an explanation.

He does anyways.

"Why not?" he asks, leaning back and looking at her, brow raised. "Thought I told you to hold on with two hands?"

"It's hard to hold on to something that doesn't want to stay," she spits back, tasting something like bile in the back of her throat. The gaping wound that is Matt Murdock is still too fresh to speak of, and she feels that with every second of this discussion, Frank is ripping it open even further. His next question goes unasked, but she answers it anyways. "He puts more stock in soulmarks than I do."

That manages to pull a wince from the ex-marine. "Shit," he mumbles. "Sorry for askin'. That's tough."

She bites back the tears that threaten to spill over her eyes. She remembers the way he drew away when she told him, told him that they didn't match, remembers the way he grew more and more distant. She doesn't want to remember it anymore.

So she switches the conversation back to him. "What about you?" she asks lightly, cursing the way her voice cracks ever so slightly. "Do you think someone's made from the same star as you? Ever tried calling one of those shitty telemarketer lines to get a reading?"

He lets out a snort. "Never," he replies. "It's a load of corporate bullshit if you ask me. Me and my old lady, we didn't match. Didn't ever cause us any trouble. Had two good kids, good lifeâ€¦"

His voice trails off, and the silence that follows can only be

described as painful. He looks off into the distance, to something that Karen can't see, and suddenly she's hit by a wave of longing, longing to see him as the man he used to be. Whole. Complete. Happy with his wife and children by his side.

(The thought crosses her mind for a brief instant, too quickly to fully comprehend, too slowly to ignore, and she sees it. She sees him standing with her, arms wrapped around her waist, whispering sweet nothings into her ear as a beautiful boy plays in the park below, their boy. She sees him leaving his life of pain and monstrosities for something softer, sweeter. She sees him tracing her soulmark over top of her blouse, having memorized every dot, every distance between them, and she knows that she would do the same. She sees him having what he once had again, this time with her. Then, it's gone.)

"I just," he whispers, his voice so soft, so vulnerable, it scares her even more than when she saw him kill those two men at the diner that night. "I just don't wanna lose that, you know? I feel it slipping away sometimes, my memories of her. It's—|it's all I've got that matters anymore. I just don't wanna lose those too. To let 'em go."

She reaches out and curls her palm around his forearm, giving it a squeeze. This time, he doesn't flinch. "You won't," she murmurs in reply. "I promise."

As she stands to go and pour herself more coffee, she folds up whatever she feels towards the man sitting on her couch and tucks it inside her chest, sensing it catch on her ribs like new nylons snagging on a chair.

What he had with his wife, that was good. That was love, soulmates or not. And if he wants to hold on to that, she'll help him in any way that she can, just like she always has.

Who gives a shit about soulmates, anyways? Not her.

* * *

><p>He spends a week with her. Honestly, she finds herself more and more surprised with each evening she comes home and finds him still there. But sure enough, they fall into a rhythm.<p>

She orders takeout the first two nights, and he finds out that she likes to feed leftovers to the stray tabby cat that sleeps on the fire escape. They play a few board games, watch movies (Citizen Kane and Gone With the Wind, both picked by him), and he even helps her make dinner one night. Eventually she tells him about her work too, about the stories that she's writing, a long article and the low water care in the apartment complexes south of Hell's Kitchen, the piece on investment fraud in Laxton and Lake Energy Corporation.

He nods thoughtfully when he hears about that one. "I'll look into it when I get the chance," he promises her. He catches her sour look and lets out small chuckle. "What's the problem, ma'am?"

"Don't kill my story."

"Figuratively or literally?"

"_Both_."

The issue of places to sleep, however, is a touchy one. She takes the couch the first two nights, letting him heal up, but he insists that they switch on the third day. The next night she tells him that he's overreacting and they should just share the bed. It all cumulates with her telling him to "stop acting like a fucking teenager who can't control his hormones." That earns her nothing but a glowering look. Still, when she gets out of the shower that night and walks into her room, she finds him curled beneath her covers, out like a light. She has to bite back a smile.

Sharing an apartment with him is easier than she first thought it would be. She'd almost dare say that domesticity suits him, except that he seems restless. The cat meowing on the fire escape causes him to stiffen like a board. The sound of a hallway door slamming causes him to jump to his feet. There were only two times in the entire week he didn't seem on edge, when they were cooking dinner together, Bob Marley blasting through her \$6 Target speakers, and when she had curled up into his side during *Gone With the Wind*, falling asleep with 20 minutes of the film left. (He had made her watch the last twenty minute the next night, told her she couldn't miss the best part.) She had woken up the next morning alone in bed, and it takes her a moment to realize that he must have carried her there.

Then, one night she comes home from work, and Frank is gone.

She'd die before she'd admit it, but part of her feels bitter that he left without so much as a goodbye. Part of her wishes that she didn't have to cook dinner alone and have no one to play board games with. Then she tells herself to stop getting attached to a stray dog like him and moves on, ignoring the bitter taste in her mouth and preparing herself for another four to six months of seeing him in back alley ways and dark corners when he's not actually there.

It doesn't take nearly that long.

A week and a half later she walks into her apartment late at night to find a takeout box of pad thai from the Thai place down the road sitting on her counter, unopened. A bright orange sticky note sits next to it saying, "_Don't give the leftovers to the cat. He's too dependent on you as it is, _and she knows this is the closest thing to a thank you she's going to get.

The takeout is gone in under two minutes and she sets out a bowl of milk for cat before she realizes that she's got a grin plastered on her face. Try as she might she can't seem to get it to go away.

Three days later he shows up at her door.

Well, it's not so much "_at her door_" as much as "_in her apartment_" (it's not until the next day that she realizes he got in through an unlocked window). She unlocks the door, throws her stuff on her couch and is about to go collapse in her bed when she catches him sitting in her kitchen out of the corner of her eye and her whole body goes stiff.

"Frank," she sighs when she realizes it's him and not some psycho

serial killer (wellâ€¦). "What the hell are you doing?"

"You need to stop following the investment fraud at Laxton and Lake."

She walks to the fridge, pops a beer and takes a sip. It tastes like shit. (Still better than Josie's though.) "What, the energy company?" she asks, knowing exactly what he's talking about. "Why?"

He lets out a low growl before giving her a long, hard look. "You know exactly why," he says. "They're affiliated with the Italian mob. You keep on this track and you'll get yourself killed."

She brushes him off with a wave of her hand and another swig of beer. "I'll be fine," she says. "Have been up to this point."

But as she's turning to walk back towards her bedroom, a pair of hands grab her shoulders and whirl her around. She finds herself staring into Frank Castle's deep brown eyes, and he's close, he's _so close_ she can feel his breath on her face, the air of desperation radiating off of him.

"Karen," he says, and that gets her attention. "Karen, _please_. They _know_ you. They know your name, where you live. They'll come for you."

His words hit her hard, but she doesn't let herself show it. If he can go out and kill the scum of Hell's Kitchen, fight the worst of the worst and put his life in danger every single night, she can deal with a couple of Italian thugs coming after her.

She fixes him with a steely gaze and says, "Well, I guess I better write fast then."

She walks into her bedroom, halfway hoping that he'll follow her in.

He doesn't.

* * *

><p>Looking back on the situation, she realizes that when a man who spends his time killing mobsters tells you that the mafia is after you, you should probably put more stock in his advice than she did.<p>

They hit her when she's walking home.

Normally she'd take a cab, but it's a beautiful night out, and she's feeling particularly good, having just finished her article, so she opts to walk home instead. Maybe she shouldn't have taken the alley. Maybe she should have called the cab. All she knows for sure is that one moment she's enjoying the fresh summer air, and the next she's on the ground, her head ringing and pain shooting through the back of her skull.

A foot connects with her gut and knocks the wind out of her. From behind, someone grabs her hair, and she manages to throw an elbow, catching her attacker in the jaw and sending him tumbling back before another took his place.

"That bitch!" she hears someone hiss through still ringing ears. "Get her to her knees. I'll kill her myself!"

She feels herself being pulled to her knees, and in her daze, she looks up to see a man standing in front of her, gun in his hand, smile white against the dark night.

"Went poking your nose around someplace you shouldn't have?" he asks. "Oh, bella. Such a pity. If only you would've let up a little bit sooner, we wouldn't have to kill you then. Maybe we'd just have some fun and then let you go about your way. Such a waste."

She feels the cold metal of the gun against her forehead, sees the white flash of the man's smile, and the world spins around her. There's a gunshot. Screaming. Is she dead? She doesn't know.

The man lets out a scream, blood pours from his shoulder, and there's another gunshot. Louder this time. The man drops. Behind him, another man tries to run away. A bang and he drops as well. Two more gunshots. Two more bodies.

Karen looks up and sees a white skull advancing down the alley. The first man, the one who was about to shoot her, scrambles back, whimpering.

"Please, please," he stammers, his voice rising in panic. "Please, don't kill me. I was just following orders! Please!"

"If I had more time, I'd make sure to cut you to ribbons before I ended you. Fortunately for you, the girl you tried to kill is much more valueable to me than making you suffer, so I'll let you die quickly."

"No, please!"

A gunshot. Silence. The next thing Karen knows, She's being scooped up into a pair of strong arms, and familiar brown eyes are looking at her.

"No offence, ma'am, but you're a fucking idiot."

She buries her face in his chest to hide her tears.

He begins to walk back towards her apartment, and the ground is spinning beneath her. Darkness dances around the edge of her vision like the night trying to overtake a dying fire.

"I've got you," she hears him say. "Don't worry, I've got you."

Suddenly, a thought hits her, and panic suddenly overtakes her. Digging her fingers into the rough fabric of his shirt, she looks up at him, and says, "Please. Please, don't—don't look for it." She's barely conscious, unable to find the right words, sounds tumbling from her mouth like a babbling brook, and she's far too lightheaded to speak things that make sense anymore. "Promise me you won't look for it!"

A look of fear seems to cross his face. "Page, stop talking," he

growls. "Save your strength. It's just a little bit farther now. We don't know how badâ€œ"

"Don't look for it!" she cuts him off. " Don't look for my mark. Please, Frank!"

Her panic seems to spread to him, and he's saying something, she thinks he's shouting it, but all she can hear is the ringing in her ears and herself whispering, "Frank, please," and then everything is darkness.

* * *

><p>When she wakes up, the sun is shining through her windows. As she sits up slowly in bed, she sees him sitting in the chair opposite her room, his eyes closed, his expression anything but peaceful. Slowly, she reaches for her phone.<p>

"I already called," he says, never opening his eyes and causing her to freeze, arm outstretched. "Told 'em you weren't coming in. Said I was a friend of the family. Besides, you've got a bad concussion, shouldn't be looking at a screen."

"Oh," she says, her voice quiet. "Thank you."

He grunts in reply.

Looking around, she notices that it's almost midday, that the shades are pulled shut but light is still seeping through the cracks, and that the fabric she's wearing is soft against her skin.

She looks down at her clothes, and freezes. A different shirt. Shorts in the place of her skirt. Bandages around her wrists and elbows. He must have changed her while she was unconscious and bandaged her up, which meansâ€œ|

He opens his eyes and looks at her intently. There is a long silence, then he says, "Had to make sure there wasn't anything life threatening. You gave me a real scare there, passing out on me."

"Yeah, well I felt like I should return the favor," she mumbles under her breath, not meeting his eyes. The silence that follows is deafening, until finally she musters all of her courage and says, "You saw it, didn't you," she says softly. "My mark."

He lets out a hoarse laugh, devoid of all humor and filled with cynicism as he runs his hand over his face. "Yeah, I saw it," he says. "Sorry to disappoint you. What's the matter, Page? Didn't want to be soulmates with someone like me?"

"That's not what Iâ€œ"

"Then what did you mean, Karen?" he asks, jumping to his feet, and she'll be damned, he looks hurt. "I mean, obviously you knew. So why didn't you tell me? Thought I wouldn't want to know? Thought that maybe you might not be able to get rid of me then? Christ, Karen, if you were that afraid then justâ€œ"

"I wasn't afraid!" she cuts him off. "God, Frank, I've never been

afraid of you! You're putting words in my mouth now. I didn't even know about it until you nearly collapsed outside my door, and thenâ€œ"

"â€œa week! You had a whole week that you could've told me! We were fucking watching movies and playing Monopoly and you knew, _you knew_ and you just sat there andâ€œ"

"_I thought you said soulmarks didn't matter!_"

Her last statement comes out as a shriek, an angry sentence before tears threaten to spill over onto her cheeks, and he looks like he's been slapped across the face as he realizes that it's _true_.

"_A load of cooperate bullshit_, that's what you said!" she says, her bottom lip trembling. "I've never thought much of them anyways, and I didn't want to put that on you too, especially if you didn't believe it. I didn't wantâ€œ" Her voice gives out on her for a moment, and she swallows hard, and says, "I didn't want to lose you. I didn't want to take away whatever you had left of your wife."

Somehow, while she had been speaking, he had moved closer to her, until he dropped to his knees by her bedside. "Karen," he whispers, his voice so broken and so soft. "Karen, I loved my wife more than anything, 'cept maybe Lisa. But she's gone. And for the longest time, I felt like I wasn't ever going to recover, felt like nothing mattered, like I wasn't gonna care about anything ever again. Then, out of the blue one day, this long-legged lawyers' secretary walks into a hospital room and she," his tongue darts out and wets his lips, "she doesn't give a damn about red tape or regulations or anything like that. And next thing I know, I'm breaking apart because I've been living in a world of ghosts and she's pulling me back to the land of the living, and it hurts like hell."

He gives her a long look and her breath catches in her throat, her heart beating out of her chest, so loud she sure even he can hear it.

"I love you, Karen," he whispers. "Have since the moment I met you. I don't give a fuck about soulmarks or soulmates, but _you_, God, you're something I could hold on to forever."

She surges down and presses her mouth against his without hesitation. He leans into her and tastes of salt and sweat and gunpowder and heaven and hell all at once, and she can't get enough of it, her hands running through his short hair, pulling him closer.

"I love you, too," she murmurs against his mouth. "I love you, too."

The choked sound he makes against her is almost too much.

* * *

><p>Her eyes flutter open, and for a moment she doesn't remember where she is. Then she feels strong arms wrapped around her, and her palms pressed against bare skin, and oh. Frank is in her bed again. And neither of them have clothes on.

Well. She can't say she didn't see that one coming.

He stirs as well, letting her know that he's awake, and she murmurs, "You know, we probably should've waited to do that until after I was less concussed and you didn't have as many broken ribs."

He lets out a small groan and tightens his grip around her. "If that were the case," he mumbles against her skin, "we would've never done it."

Ok. That's fair.

She reaches up and traces his soulmark fingers outlining the dots. She feels his hand move and realizes he is doing the same thing to her. "You know," she says, "I never could figure out what it was. It was always just a bunch of dots to me."

He pulls away to give her a bewildered look. "Are you serious? And you're an investigative reporter?"

Does he sound disappointed in her? "What, Frank?" she asks, somewhat annoyed. "Was I supposed to play connect the dots for the past thirty years until I figured it out?"

"Nah," he says, a grin creeping over his face. "Just thought that you'd know something like that. Here, wait one second."

He ignores her protests as he climbs out of bed (his ass, though, what a view), and returns moments later, sharpie in hand. She gives him a skeptical look, but doesn't fight as he pulls the cap off with his teeth, and draws eight small lines on her skin, connecting them in a fashion she'd never seen before.

"There," he says, pulling away, seemingly proud of his work. "It's the libra constellation, the scales." He gives her a wry smile. "I always thought it was kind of ironic. I go around killing people, it's more judgment than justice. But I guess it's also..." He trails off and she raises a brow.

"What?" she says.

"Well," he gives a small shrug. "Balance. We balance each other."

A soft smile spreads across her face before she can stop it. "Balance," she whispers. "I like that." She looks at him long and hard, and says, "You gonna hold on to me with two hands, Frank Castle?"

"I fight the devil in hell before I'd let you go," he swears, pressing his mouth against her skin.

A small chuckle escapes her. "Be careful what you say," she mutters under her breath. "You just might have to."

"I'm going to pretend I don't know what that means so we can skip that conversation and keep doing this."

His hands jerk her ankles back and she slides towards him. He's kneeling between her legs and he presses a kiss to her stomach. She lets out something that sounds like a surprised squeak and he starts laughing against her skin.

She still isn't completely sold on this whole "soulmates" thing, but if it got her thisâ€|Well, let's just say she could get used to this.

* * *

><p>(AN So much trash. So, so, so much trash.)**

End
file.